

'Fierce Poise': Gorgeous bio of Helen Frankenthaler's LI, New York period



"Fierce Poise" is a biography on artist Helen Frankenthaler covering her life in New York in the 1950s. Credit: Penguin Press

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By **Mary Gregory** Special to Newsday Updated March 23, 2021 6:00 AM

FIERCE POISE: Helen Frankenthaler and 1950s New York by Alexander Nemerov (Penguin Press. 288 pp., \$28)

In 1956, Helen Frankenthaler was a rising young painter in the New York art world. Gordon Parks, the acclaimed commercial and fine art photographer, arrived at her studio for a *Life* magazine shoot. The result was an iconic image that's the cover of a new biography of the artist.

Sitting demurely, her legs tucked under her, atop one painting and in front of her most famous canvas, "Mountains and Sea," the artist is literally framed by her artworks. She wore a white skirt and peach blouse to blend with them, so your eye goes directly to her face, where dark hair frames soulful brown eyes as she returns the gaze with as much immediacy and presence as any subject by Rembrandt. Frankenthaler knew how to engage. She was a consummate artist.

But it's the frontispiece, a 1957 photograph by Burt Glinn, that's more revealing. He captured her in the act of creating. Intense focus contrasts with fuzzy slippers (to protect the picture surface) as she stands on a painting, pondering how to make her mark — both on the canvas and off. "Fierce Poise" is how art historian Alexander Nemerov describes that moment and Frankenthaler's unique spirit in his biography of the same name.

Through documents, letters, interviews and Nemerov's compelling prose, the book presents Frankenthaler, the gifted daughter of an educated, wealthy Manhattan family, from age 21, freshly graduated from Bennington, to her first career retrospective at The Jewish Museum at 31. Ten chapters chronicle 10 years, 1950 to 1960, an exhilarating decade when Americans redefined what art could be.

"Fierce Poise" brings us vicariously to Frankenthaler's own first solo show, then to her initial glimpse of the work of Jackson Pollock, whose influence she both acknowledged and transcended. Among the first to pour paint onto canvases on the floor, Frankenthaler used oils thinned with turpentine on raw cotton. Her pigments soaked into the fibers, creating ethereal clouds of color. Frankenthaler's "soak-stain" technique was key to the development of Color-Field abstraction, and her influence continued for decades. In Frankenthaler's abstractions, both process and movement are calm and meditative, and her colors and forms create lyrical, poetic compositions reflecting emotions and responses to nature. "The light touch," she said, "is the strongest gesture of all."

Nemerov, chair of the art and art history department at Stanford University, weaves his own observations into the story. Between meandering lines and luminous passages, he creates a shimmering portrait of the artist. "She sought to transform life, to bestow it with beauty and power and glory in such a way that the person looking at her art would sense that our experience of the world *is*, in fact, beautiful, powerful, glorious," he states.

Readers will find history, name dropping and lots of behind-the-scenes glimpses into glorious days in the New York art world. There are chapters that chronicle travels, others

that explore influences, relationships, successes and frustrations. Frankenthaler's childhood brilliance, teenage angst, blossoming womanhood and adult bouts of depression are explored. Her romance with art critic Clement Greenberg and marriage to painter Robert Motherwell, two giants of 20th century art, raised eyebrows at the time. Some said they were a way to leverage her career. Nemerov disagrees. Motherwell, he writes, was "the love of her life." Frankenthaler was the rare woman married to a renowned painter who was regarded as an important artist on her own. It was a hard-won right.

One chapter focuses on 1955, a productive summer in a rented house neighboring Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner's in East Hampton, which was, Nemerov states, "second only to Manhattan itself as an epicenter of the New York art world." Four years earlier, Frankenthaler and fellow Long Island artist Larry Rivers, stood on a Hamptons dune and made an oath, with all the earnestness of youth, to always be true in their art, and it was in her art that she was truly centered. From childhood days drawing chalk lines outside the Metropolitan Museum till her death in 2011, Helen Frankenthaler never left painting, and art still bears her touch.

"Fierce Poise" and 28 photographs offer a rewarding journey. It would have been nice to spend more than 10 youthful years with Frankenthaler. She worked for five more decades, creating enthralling, powerful paintings, four of which can currently be seen at the Nassau Museum.

"A work is great when you are uplifted," she once said. These are good days to spend in the company of Helen Frankenthaler.

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